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RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY PRIORITY 1085
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1278
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND PRIORITY 0298
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 0704
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000020

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 1/9/07: MORE INTERIM MINISTERS;
BAINIMARAMA ADDS HATS; WORRIES ABOUT THE JUDICIARY

REF: SUVA 018 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) The total of ministers tapped for Fiji's interim administration reached 16 with the swearing in of 6 on Jan. 9, including former PM Chaudhry as Finance Minister. They join Interim PM Bainimarama, 8 interim ministers sworn in yesterday (ref), and Ratu Epeli Ganilau to be sworn in next week. Ratu Epeli and his National Alliance Party (NAP) have been obvious and vocal backers of Bainimarama. One relative surprise was Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau, long a social activist and only recently a politician. Reportedly Bainimarama intends to retain the Home Affairs and Information portfolios. We hear Fiji's judges are pondering how to react to the military's effort to meddle in judicial matters. Some seem willing, even perhaps complicit; others are very upset. As events in Fiji continue to unfold, a credible, neutral judicial system will be crucially important, but it is not a sure thing. End summary.

More interim ministers: Chaudhry, Ganilau

12. (C) Six more interim-government ministers were sworn in on Jan. 9, with another in the cards. They include:

-- Mahendra Chaudhry, Interim Minister for Finance, Sugar Reform, and National Planning. See reftel for comment. The head of the National Federation Party (NFP), the arch-rival within Fiji's Indian community to Chaudhry's FLP, said accepting the jobs was "a betrayal of democracy." In remarks after the swearing in, Chaudhry noted the incongruity of having been removed as Minister of Finance by the RFMF's Rabuka coup in 1987 and now reassuming the job following the Bainimarama coup. When asked about Bainimarama's "no running in the next election" mandate for interim ministers (see ref), Chaudhry suggested that it would be a shame if those who perform really well couldn't run, so maybe the issue can be revisited one day in Cabinet.

-- Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, Interim Minister for Youth and Sports. Vayeshnoi, an FLP stalwart and a very close associate of Chaudhry, was Minister for Energy in Qarase's multi-party cabinet. In the 1999 Chaudhry Government, Vayeshnoi was Information Minister. He has also been FLP spokesman. When first elected to parliament in 1994, he was the youngest ever MP in Fiji. He is a farmer by background, from Sigatoka.

-- Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau, Interim Minister for Labor, Industrial Relations, Tourism, and the Environment.

Rounds-Ganilau entered politics in 2006, winning a surprise victory in the Suva General Communal seat over incumbent Ken Zinck. Rounds-Ganilau and General-Voters colleague Mick Beddoes served as the opposition in the 2006 Parliament, so she was Deputy Opposition Leader. Rounds-Ganilau has long been a social activist. She has a strong record in the NGO community. Some former colleagues were quite shocked that she accepted a ministerial job. She told an embassy spouse yesterday that she agonized over the decision after receiving daily phone calls from Bainimarama for three weeks. In the end, she decided Fiji needs her right now.

-- Jone Navakamocea, Interim Minister for Local Government and Urban Development. Navakamocea won a parliamentary seat in 2006 under Qarase's SDL banner and served as State Minister for National Planning in the multi-party cabinet. He reportedly formally applied for a cabinet position in the interim administration and resigned from the SDL Party. Navakamocea was previously Deputy Secretary of Finance.

-- Tevita Vuibau, Interim Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources. Vuibau is a former principal science officer in the Office of Marine Geology, Mineral Resources Department.

-- Jainend Kumar, Interim Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry. Kumar formerly was Director of Research at the Koronivia Research Center, Ministry of Agriculture.

-- Ratu Epeli Ganilau, reportedly to be Interim Minister for Fijian Affairs. Ganilau informed the media today that he has accepted the job but will not be sworn in until next week when he returns to Suva from Taveuni, his home island.

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Ganilau is son of former Fiji President Ganilau, who was one of Fiji's three highest chiefs, and he is married to Adi Ateca Mara, a daughter of Ratu Mara. Ratu Epeli Ganilau was Commander of the RFMF in the 1990s and chose Bainimarama to succeed him. Ganilau headed the Great Council of Chiefs after the 2000 coup but lost that job when he failed to get re-nominated to the GCC. He and his National Alliance Party (NAP) competed in the 2006 elections, accenting multi-cultural themes. The NAP had a disastrous showing, not coming close to winning any seats. Ganilau reportedly has had severe financial difficulties and was staying at the Army camp recently. Ganilau has been presumed to be one of the "shadowy figures" behind Bainimarama's coup. By many accounts he is a nice guy but is very shallow intellectually.

Bainimarama: Home Affairs and Information

13. (C) RFMF spokesman Leweni told the media today that Interim PM Bainimarama will retain the Home Affairs and Information portfolios in addition to continuing as Commander RFMF. Home Affairs and Information are both crucial responsibilities. The Home Affairs Minister is technically the boss of the military commander, though Bainimarama often ignored that relationship. Information is the propaganda function, something the RFMF has always accented. There is no way Bainimarama can actually manage all four of his important hats. Presumably he will delegate most responsibilities to subordinates.

The Judiciary's role

14. (C) A well-placed source tells us Fiji's High Court Justices are still attempting to decide how to react to Bainimarama's decision last week to send Chief Justice Fatiaki and the Chief Magistrate on indefinite leave. Reportedly some, like Justice Tony Gates, are prepared to accept responsibilities assigned by the military. Very possibly, Justice Nazhat Shameem is positioning herself to become Acting Chief Justice, if called. Others reportedly are extremely troubled by Bainimarama's imposition of authority over judicial prerogatives. Our source predicted

the Fiji judiciary will split asunder if Shameem is promoted.

A problem is that the Judicial Services Commission (JSC), which is charged with regulating judicial-administration/personnel issues under the Constitution, is currently non-functional. The JSC's members are the CJ (forced to be on leave), the Chair of the Public Services Commission (recently replaced extra-constitutionally by the RFMF), and the head of the Fiji Law Society (who has been outspoken against the coup but who presumably could not override Bainimarama in the present environment).

Comment

15. (C) It is possible a few more ministerial appointments will dribble in, but the interim administration's cast is nearing completion. Ethnic Fijians dominate (11 of 16), but Chaudhry, an Indian, has the important Finance and Sugar portfolios. There were rumors that Bainimarama would make Chaudhry Deputy PM today, but it didn't happen. Most ministers appear reasonably competent; some, like Chaudhry, are extremely savvy. How they work together will be interesting to observe. Bainimarama appears to us to prefer issuing orders, not accenting collegiality. A number of the interim ministers will chafe at that.

16. (C) The state of the judicial system is a worry. Admittedly, there have long been complaints that CJ Fatiaki is lazy and a poor administrator and that some of Fiji's magistrates are corrupt. But many people thought an increasingly professional police force under Commissioner Hughes (now departed) and a credible set of High Court Justices were bright spots. We are already seeing indications that the police under military oversight may be retreating from professionalism in some criminal investigations, such as the murder on the margins of the wedding reception of Bainimarama's daughter. If and when cases concerning coup-related issues start reaching the courts, a neutral, credible, "rule of law"-oriented judiciary will be essential, but it is not guaranteed.
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